

Priesthood and Sacrifice in the English Church

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(These extracts from the Archbishops' Letter of 1897 have been allowed to speak for themselves, with the minimum of commentary—

E. R. HARDY, JR.)

I

“IT is the fortune of our office that often, when we would fain write about the common salvation, an occasion arises for debating some controverted question which cannot be postponed to another time.” So begins the letter *Saepius officio* which the Archbishops of England addressed in 1897 “to the whole body of Bishops of the Catholic Church.” The sentiment is one which those concerned with church affairs must often share. At the same time occasions of controversy often lead to useful statements of a previously undefined tradition. Such was the case with *Saepius officio*. Produced as a reply to the denial of English ordinations by Pope Leo XIII, it contains a valuable summary of the tradition of the English

Church on the Priesthood and the Eucharist. Though not a formal statement of the Church, it derives considerable authority from the position and learning of the prelates who drafted it, and from the fact that it was addressed on behalf of the Anglican Communion to the Bishops of all Christendom. First drawn up by John Wordsworth, Bishop of Salisbury, a leading authority on historical and liturgical matters, especially those concerned with Anglican relations with other parts of the Christian world, it was criticized by other scholarly Bishops and further revised by the Archbishops who signed and issued it—Frederick Temple of Canterbury and William Maclagan of York. It was widely circulated in the Latin original and in Greek, English, and French translations, but seems now to have become quite rare.

The extracts here presented are confined as far as possible to sections of positive character and permanent interest.¹ The immediate technical controversy was well handled, but is of little concern except to those engaged in the study of the subject. A larger topic is raised by the charge that the Church of England had not intended to continue the ancient Catholic Priesthood, with its power of

¹ Quotations are from the English version, reprint of 1912.

offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The Pope had quoted in his argument two canons of the council of Trent (Session XXII, 3; Session XXIII, 1) "from which he infers that the principal grace and power of the Christian priesthood is the consecration and oblation of the Body and Blood of the Lord." While not recognizing the authority of that Council as such, the Archbishops reply "that we make provision with the greatest reverence for the consecration of the holy Eucharist, and commit it only to properly ordained Priests and to no other ministers of the Church. Further we truly teach the doctrine of Eucharistic sacrifice, and do not believe it to be a 'nude commemoration of the Sacrifice of the Cross,' an opinion which seems to be attributed to us by the quotation made from that Council. But we think it sufficient in the Liturgy which we use in celebrating the holy Eucharist—while lifting up our hearts to the Lord, and when now consecrating the gifts already offered that they may become to us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ—to signify the sacrifice which is offered at that point of the service in such terms as these. We continue a perpetual memory of the precious death of Christ, who is our Advocate with the Father and the Propitiation

for our sins, according to His precept, until His coming again. For first we offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; then next we plead and represent before the Father the Sacrifice of the Cross, and by it we confidently entreat remission of sins and all other benefits of the Lord's Passion for all the whole Church; and lastly we offer the sacrifice of ourselves to the Creator of all things which we have already signified by the oblations of His creatures. This whole action, in which the people has necessarily to take its part with the Priest, we are accustomed to call the Eucharistic sacrifice."

The sketch of the Liturgy is of course based on the English Prayer Book, in which the oblation is not as specifically mentioned as in the Scottish-American form familiar to us. All the more significant, therefore, is the analysis of the ideas expressed in the English rite. The Archbishops continue with a similar analysis of the Roman Canon, intended to show that the ideas of sacrifice contained in that ancient Eucharistic prayer agree closely with those of the Prayer Book. Finally they conclude their discussion of the Eucharistic sacrifice with the following words: "The matter is indeed one full of mystery and fitted to draw on-

wards the minds of men by strong feelings of love and piety to high and deep thoughts. But, inasmuch as it ought to be treated with the highest reverence and to be considered a bond of Christian charity rather than an occasion for subtle disputations, too precise definitions of the manner of the sacrifice, or of the relation which unites the sacrifice of the eternal Priest and the sacrifice of the Church, which in some way certainly are one, ought in our opinion to be avoided rather than pressed into prominence."²

II

HAVING thus illustrated in one important connection the maintenance of Catholic tradition in the Anglican priesthood, the letter proceeds to a detailed defence of the forms of ordaining Presbyters and Bishops which have been in use since 1550. Against the latter it had been brought forward that the Prayer Book service does not use the phrase "high priesthood" in referring to Bishops. The reply points out a similar lack in many ancient Catholic forms, and passes on to an interesting historical statement on the rela-

² Quotations from Section 11.

tion of Bishops and Presbyters to the Christian priesthood. "We are content with the name of Bishop to describe the office of those who, when they were left, after the removal of the Apostles, to be chief pastors in the Church, exercised the right of ordaining and confirming, and ruled, together with a body of presbyters, over a single 'parochia' or diocese, as it is now called. And to this order the Pope, in the beginning of his letter, following the sound custom of antiquity, reckons himself to belong.³ Bishops are undoubtedly Priests just as Presbyters are Priests, and in early ages they enjoyed this title more largely than Presbyters did; nay, it was not till the IVth or Vth century that Presbyters, in the Latin Church at any rate, came to be called Priests in their own right. But it does not therefore follow that Bishops nowadays ought to be called high Priests in the form of Consecration. The question of the priesthood of Bishops was perhaps different in early times, certainly up to the IXth and possibly to the XIth century, when a simple Deacon was often made Bishop *per saltum*, i.e., without passing through the presbyterate. In those days, of course, it was fitting, if not indeed necessary, to apply to

³ He began, of course, "Leo Episcopus, servus servorum Dei."

the Bishop the term Priest, as, *e.g.*, is done in the prayer still used in the Pontifical, which speaks of 'the horn of priestly grace.' But inasmuch as this custom of consecration *per saltum* has long since died out (though perhaps never expressly forbidden by statute) and every Bishop has already, during the period of his presbyterate, been a Priest, it is no longer necessary to confer the priesthood afresh, nor, if we give our candid opinion, is it a particularly good and regular proceeding. Nor ought the Romans to require it, inasmuch as the Council of Trent calls preaching of the Gospel 'the chief duty of Bishops' (Session V, *On Reform*, chap. 2, and Session XXIV, *On Ref.*, chap. 4). It is not, therefore, necessary, that either high priesthood or any other fresh priesthood should be attributed to Bishops." Although the Prayer Book does not call Anglican Bishops high Priests and Pontiffs, the phrases are not avoided in other official documents; a footnote quotes from a letter written by twelve Bishops on behalf of Archbishop Grindall in 1580, in which the latter is described as "Noble Christian Prelate and High Priest of God in the Church of England."⁴

From 1550 till 1662 the words "Receive the

⁴ Section 13.

Holy Ghost" at the imposition of hands were not followed by the specific mention of "Bishop" or "Priest," although the remainder of the form sufficed to make the intention clear. Even this, however is more definite than the rite of the Roman Pontifical, in which "Accipe Spiritum Sanctum" stands alone at the imposition of hands on a Bishop-elect. Having noted these facts, the letter continues: "You may remember, brethren, that these are the only words quoted by the Council of Trent to prove that Order confers grace (Session XXIII, *On the Sacrament of Order*, chap. 3). This form, then, whether contained in one sentence as in the Roman Church, or in two as in ours, is amply sufficient to create a Bishop, if the true intention be openly declared, which is done in the other prayers and suffrages (which clearly refer to the office, work, and ministry of a Bishop), in the examination and other like ways. We say that the words, 'Receive the Holy Ghost' are sufficient, not that they are essential. For they do not occur in the more ancient Pontificals whether Roman or English, nor in any Eastern book of any date. But we gladly agree with the Council of Trent that the words are not vainly

uttered by Bishops⁵ either in consecrating a Bishop or in ordering a Presbyter, since they are words spoken by our Lord to His Disciples from whom all our offices and powers are derived, and are fit and appropriate for so sacred an occasion. They are not equally appropriate in the case of the diaconate, and are accordingly not used by us in admitting to that office.⁶

"The form of ordering a Presbyter employed among us in 1550 and afterwards was equally appropriate. For after the end of the 'Eucharistic' prayer, which recalls our minds to the institution of our Lord, there followed the laying on of hands by the Bishop with the assistant Priests, to which is joined the 'imperative' form taken from the Pontifical, but at the same time fuller and more solemn. . . . For after the words 'Receive the Holy Ghost' there immediately followed, as in the modern Roman Pontifical. . . . 'Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained,' and then the words from the Gospel (Luke xii 42) and St. Paul (I Cor. iv 1), which were very rightly added by our Fathers, 'and be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of

⁵ Session XXIII, *On the Sacrament of Order*, Canon 4.

⁶ Section 14.

God and of his holy Sacraments: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' This form is suitable to no other ministry of the church but that of a Priest, who has what is called the power of the keys and who alone with full right dispenses the Word and mysteries of God to the people, whether he remain a Presbyter or be advanced to higher duties as Bishop. Then there followed, as there still follows, the ceremony of conferring the power to preach and to minister the Sacraments in the sphere where a man has been appointed to that ministry, together with the delivery of the Holy Bible, which is, in our opinion, the chief instrument of the sacred ministry and includes in itself all its other powers, according to the particular order to which the man is ordained."

After a further note that the English word "Priest" is used as corresponding to *sacerdos* or *hiereus* rather than to *presbuteros*, the letter observes that when the additions of 1662 were made, "it would not seem to have been done in view of the Roman controversy, but in order to enlighten the minds of the Presbyterians, who were trying to find a ground for their opinions in our Prayer-Book. Historians are well aware that at this period,

when the king had been killed, his son driven into exile, and the Church Government upset, the Church of England's debate with the Presbyterians and other innovators was much more severe than it was with the Romans. . . . But the XVIth century form was not merely in itself sufficient, but more than sufficient. For the collect, *Almighty God, giver of all good things*, which beseeches God on behalf of those called 'to the office of priesthood,' that they may faithfully serve Him in that office, was at that time part of the form, and used to be said by the Bishop immediately before the examination. Now, however, since the new words clearly express the same sense, it has been moved elsewhere and takes the place of the collect for the day."⁷

III

MORE important than these detailed questions of form is the broader one of the intention of the Church of England in its Ordinal. For this the Archbishops quote the preface to the Ordinal, as it first appeared in 1550, and comment further: "The succession and continuance of these offices

⁷ Section 15.

from the Lord through the Apostles and the other ministers of the primitive Church is also clearly implied in the 'Eucharistical' prayers which precede the words *Receive the Holy Ghost*. Thus the intention of our Fathers was to keep and continue these offices which come down from the earliest times, and 'reverently to use and esteem them,' in the sense, of course, in which they were received from the Apostles and had been up to that time in use."⁸ To be sure, the rite of ordination was greatly simplified, and a number of rather confusing ceremonies were omitted, of which latter the letter says "that these ceremonies are 'contemptible and harmful,' or that they are useless at their proper place and time, we do by no means assert—we declare only that they are not necessary."

The rationale of the Prayer Book service of ordination to the priesthood, and with it the Anglican tradition as to the nature of the priestly office, is then expounded as follows: the compilers of the Prayer Book "first aimed at simplicity, and concentrated the parts of the whole rite as it were on one prominent point, so that no one could doubt at what moment the grace and power

⁸ Section 17.

of the priesthood was given. For such is the force of simplicity that it lifts men's minds towards divine things more than a long series of ceremonies united by however good a meaning. Therefore, having placed in the forefront the prayers which declared both the office of the priesthood and its succession from the ministry of the Apostles, they joined the laying on of hands with our Lord's own words. . . . Secondly, when they considered in their own minds the various offices of the priesthood, they saw that the Pontifical in common use was defective in two particulars. For whereas the following offices were recounted in the Bishop's address: 'It is the duty of a Priest to offer, to bless, to preside, to preach, and to baptize,' and the like, and mention was made in the old 'form' for the presbyterate 'of the account which they are to give of the stewardship entrusted to them,' nevertheless in the other forms nothing was said except about offering sacrifice and remitting sins, and the forms conveying these powers were separated some distance from one another." (The reference is to the old Latin precatory forms and the mediaeval imperative ones, both of which were used in Sarum as in Roman Pontificals.) The letter continues: "again, too, they saw that the duties of the

pastoral office had but little place in the Pontifical, although the Gospel speaks out fully upon them. For this reason, then, they especially set before our Priests the pastoral office, which is particularly that of Messenger, Watchman, and Steward of the Lord, in that noble address which the Bishop has to deliver, and in the very serious examination which follows: in words which must be read and weighed and compared with the Holy Scriptures, or it is impossible really to know the worth of our Ordinal. On the other hand, as regards the Sacraments in their revision of the 'imperative' forms, they gave the first place to our Lord's own words, not merely out of reverence, but because those words were then commonly believed to be the necessary 'form.' Then they entrusted to our Priests all 'the mysteries of the Sacraments anciently instituted' (to use the words of our old Sacramentary⁹ . . .), and did not exalt one aspect of one of them and neglect the others. Lastly, they placed in juxtaposition the form which imprints the character and form which confers jurisdiction."

This order, the Archbishops maintain, follows the example of our Lord, who not only instituted the Sacraments, but said "many things and those

⁹ The quotation is from XIth cent. and later Sarum use.

most worthy of attention about the pastoral office, both His own, as the Good Shepherd, and that of His disciples, who, instructed by his example ought to lay down their lives for the brethren. . . . Many things, too, did he deliver in the Gospel about the preaching of the Word, the stewardship entrusted to His chosen servants, the mission of His apostles and His disciples in His stead, the conversion of sinners and remission of offences in the Church, mutual service to one another, and much else of the same kind." So St. Peter "as a Fellow-elder . . . exhorts the elders, that is the Presbyters and Bishops, to 'feed the flock of God which is among you,' and promises them that 'when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away' (I Peter v 1-4)," and St. Paul speaks in similar tone to the Presbyters and Bishops of Ephesus (Acts xx 18-35). A later witness to this emphasis on the pastoral office "is Pope St. Gregory, to whom the whole English race now scattered over the face of the earth owes so much, who in his book 'On the pastoral care' has much to say on these matters and on the personal life of pastors, but is almost or entirely silent on the offering of sacrifice." St. Peter, the letter notes, who in one part of his First Epistle

commends the pastoral office to Presbyters, elsewhere speaks to the whole people "about offering, as a holy priesthood, spiritual sacrifices to God. This shows that the former office is more peculiar to Presbyters, seeing that it represents the attitude of God towards men (Ps. xxiii; Isaiah xl 10, 11; Jerem. xxiii 1-4; Ezek. xxxiv 11-31), while the latter is shared in some measure with the people. For the Priest, to whom the dispensing of the Sacraments, and especially the consecration of the Eucharist, is entrusted, must always do the service of the altar with the people standing by and sharing it with him. Thus the prophecy of Malachi (i 11) is fulfilled, and the name of God is great among the Gentiles through the pure offering of the Church." A footnote illustrates this corporate character of the priesthood by quoting several phrases from the Roman Missal, such as "Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be made acceptable in the sight of God the Father Almighty," and from a commentary on the Liturgy by St. Peter Damian (*The Lord be With You*, chap. 8). On the words "for whom we offer unto thee" Damian comments, "It is clearly shown that this sacrifice of praise, although it seems to be specially offered by a single Priest, is really offered by all the faithful, women

as well as men; for those things which he touches with his hands in offering them to God are committed to God by the deep inward devotion of the whole multitude," and on "this oblation of us Thy servants," "from these words it is more clear than daylight that the sacrifice which is laid upon the sacred altars by the Priest is generally offered by the whole family of God."

The Anglican priesthood, in other words, is the Catholic priesthood as it has always existed in the Church, with a special emphasis in its ordination on the pastoral function of the priestly office, so often neglected in the later Middle Ages. The Archbishops might have observed that the Council of Trent aimed at a similar revival of the pastoral duties of Priests as well as Bishops, although not giving it any new liturgical expression. Instead, however, they allow themselves in summary a somewhat playful *argumentum ad hominem*, or more precisely *ad papam*. "We, therefore, taking our stand on Holy Scripture, make reply that in the ordering of Priests we do duly lay down and set forth the stewardship and ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the power of remitting and retaining sins, and other functions of the pastoral office, and that in these we do sum up and rehearse all

other functions. Indeed, the Pope himself is a witness to this, who especially derives the honor of the Pontifical tiara from Christ's triple commendation of his flock to the penitent St. Peter. Why, then, does he suppose that which he holds so honourable in his own case to contribute nothing to the dignity and offices of the priesthood in the case of Anglican Priests?"¹⁰ Finally some Eastern Orthodox definitions of the Priesthood are quoted as providing interesting parallels to the Anglican phraseology. The *Orthodox Confession* of Peter Mogila, issued about 1640, mentioned only two functions of the priesthood, absolving sins and preaching, while the *Longer Russian Catechism* of 1839 referred only to ministering the Sacraments and feeding the flock, and spoke thus of the three Orders: "The Deacon serves at the Sacraments; the Priest hallows the Sacraments, in dependence on the Bishop; the Bishop not only hallows the Sacraments himself, but has the power also to impart to others by the laying on of his hands the gift and grace to hallow them." "The Eastern Church," the Archbishops observe, "is assuredly at one with us in teaching that the ministry of more than one mystery describes the character of

¹⁰ Section 19.

the priesthood better than the offering of a single sacrifice." A further parallel is found in prayer from the Greek Ordinal: "Fill this man, whom Thou hast chosen to attain the rank of Presbyter, with the gift of Thy Holy Spirit, that he may be worthy blamelessly to assist at Thy Sanctuary, to preach the Gospel of Thy Kingdom, to minister the Word of Thy Truth, to offer Thee spiritual gifts and sacrifices, to renew Thy people by the laver of regeneration," etc.¹¹

IV

THE general tone of this letter of the Archbishops is perhaps even more important than the particular points it discusses. It assumes that the Anglican Communion belongs to a larger whole, the body of Catholic Christendom; it defends our right to that position and at the same time is not afraid to point out the special contributions which we have to make to the Catholic Church at large. On this particular point it suggests that the Catholic priesthood, as we have received and continue it, is also in the truest sense the Evangelical ministry. If these principles are to be of any use in our present discus-

¹¹ Section 20.

sions, they must also be joined with the desire for unity in the Gospel which the Archbishops exemplify in the closing sentences of their letter. "To conclude, since all this has been laid before us in the name of peace and unity, we wish it to be known to all men that we are at least equally zealous in our devotion to peace and unity in the Church. We acknowledge that the things which our brother Pope Leo XIIIth has written from time to time in other letters are sometimes very true and always written with a good will. For the difference and debate between us and him arises from a diverse interpretation of the selfsame Gospel, which we all believe and honour as the only true one. . . . Join with us then, we entreat you, most reverend brethren, in weighing patiently what Christ intended when He established the ministry of His Gospel. When this has been done, more will follow as God wills in His own good time. God grant that, even from this controversy, may grow fuller knowledge of the truth, greater patience, and a broader desire for peace, in the Church of Christ the Saviour of the world!"

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